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2019

## The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last

Evie Metz

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# The Puppets Look Like Flowers at Last

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By Evie Metz

Master of Fine Art Photography + Film, Virginia Commonwealth University

School of the Arts, 2019

Directors:

Paul Thulin

Graduate Director & Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of Photography + Film

Mary Beth Reed

Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of Photography + Film

Stephen Vitiello

Department Chair and Professor

Virginia Commonwealth University, Department of Kinetic Imaging

Advisors:

Mark Boulos, Orla McHardy

## Acknowledgements

to the few who have believed in me,  
supported me along my way,  
and helped make this possible:

Nicholas Daly. Paul Thulin. Shane Rocheleau. Melanie Metz. My parents.

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## **Abstract**

“The Puppets Look Like Flowers at Last”

By Evie Metz, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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Directors:

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I create handcrafted stop-frame puppet animations that explore self-conscious emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and envy within unpredictable life scenarios. The stories depict instinctive, natural human behavior. These are animations of inner life. This work attempts to resolve conflicting elements of the human psyche. In merging digital technology and meticulous handcraft, the animations are presented with corresponding animatronics that are an extension of the atmospheres within, in a physical manner.

## **Introduction**

The urge to uncover aspects of human condition permeates my work, from the fundamental curiosity of a child tearing apart their doll to uncover what lies within to continuing a quest in uncovering basic human urges through my puppet animated dramas and tragedies. There is a controversial line between the childlike and the adult-like that can be ambiguous, and at some times more discernible while other times less. I create handcrafted stop-frame puppet animations that explore self-conscious emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and envy within unpredictable life scenarios. These are animations about inner life, attempting to resolve conflicting elements of the human psyche. The structuring of the individual stories is fragmented, deliberately omitting information in a manner similar to real life. Each animation follows a different course of events, involving different characters, environments, and scenarios. My production methodology adopts improvisational role play in which I act out each characters body movements and gesture before performing the puppets. I am the performer. I emphasize grotesque aesthetic embodiment in my characters' performances to create a sense of empathy. At first glance, these puppets might appear scary, but upon closer observation the viewer may realize it is the puppet who is scared.



## Part 1: Puppets, Pupa

“Humans in their own bodies were also microcosms or little world’s containing all the attributes of the greater world that ruled them. By gnosis, humans could internalize the cosmos and thereby become divine themselves, able to live in both realms simultaneously. Because matter was alive, it could be spiritualized and made immortal by humans capable of manipulating the highly charged connection between specific material things and their counterparts in the spiritual world.”<sup>1</sup> Klausner, Lewis

When I began sculpting characters, my familiarity with animation, particularly with digital animation, had been shaped mostly by an outside perspective limited to the few mainstream platforms readily accessible. For example, in contemporary American society, most people associate a puppet’s singular function to be intended for children’s toys and/or dolls, or that the primary use of stop motion animation is for commercial use. My initial hunch was that these are not finite limitations, but rather an exciting and inviting territory from which to work and challenge both the medium and myself. I find in using puppets, with their playful and innocent associations in storytelling, I can more easily approach complex subject matter in a manner that is easier to handle psychologically. There is constant contention of my choice in medium and the direction of my subject matter which conflates softness and hardness, sweetness and bitterness, childlike and more adultlike. While these separate poles of the spectrum work against one another, at times in my animations the boundaries become less distinguished and potentially so ambiguous as to become one.

The vast history and widespread cultural adaptations of puppetry prove their deep rooted presence and power in portraying moral concerns. Within Russian Formalism, a literary movement that emerged around 1915, key figure Viktor Shklovsky proposed a conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> Klausner, Lewis. "Victoria Nelson. The Secret Life of Puppets." *Womens Studies* 31, no. 5 (2002): 32.

literary device called “defamiliarization.” Essentially this involves taking something familiar and re-presenting it in an unfamiliar manner by way of language and rearticulation. To some extent this process broadly speaks to the nature of artistic practice in terms of a cyclical regeneration of ideas and form. More specifically it refers to taking what already exists in everyday life and re-presenting it in such an uncommon way that an audience’s perception of such a thing can be further enhanced and perhaps even enlightened. In my visual storytelling, using puppets as people rather than casting humans as models, there is such a translation from reality into something else that it can provide a level of distance and unfamiliarity in which social critiques can be more easily diagnosed.

Before expanding to theatrical purposes, puppets were used frequently in ritualistic ceremonies. During this pre-theatre existence, such objects were not yet even referred to as puppets. The earliest sign of any puppetlike existence was by use of materialistic figurative forms made to symbolize humans or divine beings. In both historical, ritualistic, and present day theatrical purpose, puppets have and continue to hold a high stature for reflecting, manipulating, and responding to concerns of human existence.

Progressively over time, puppets can be traced in relation to the Freudian uncanny, the Lacanian Other, and the Kristevan Abject. Freud’s concept of the uncanny refers to the unsettling psychological experience of something unfamiliar on the complete verge of strong familiarity. Puppets can be unnervingly uncanny in such cases when so closely resembling the ability to feel and soulfully react despite being merely inanimate materials. A puppeteer’s mysterious relationship to their life-like puppet strikes symmetries with Lacan’s discourse of the Other in terms of opposites, doubles, and doppelgangers. There are parallels between the ambiguity

concerning the childlike and adult-like as it relates to puppetry and Lacan's notion of the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan, a child's first time experiencing their own reflection manifests the concept of double. As the infant recognizes an other in the mirror, thus emerges their recognition of selfhood as it depends on external otherness or objectness. In other words, it is the moment of awareness that the subject (I) am over there (me) in the mirror. The very act of creating, sculpting, and materializing a puppet is mirror-like in the sense that the puppet mirrors their puppeteer, and one creates the other. A reflection that waits in the mirror is similar to a puppet waits for the puppeteer to call it into action. An experience that is abject is a process of becoming immersed in a such a feeling to the fullest degree. Kristeva proposes that abjection can be an intensely disturbed convention of identity in which one experiences a breakdown state with difficulty distinguishing what is self from what is other. In my animations there are a variety of characters who conduct a variety of actions. Through performing these puppets they enact the illusion of living lives of their own, capable of making their own decisions and following their own paths. In actuality, every blink of their eye or twitch of their body comes from the movement of my hands and body. Thus the distinction between self and other, puppeteer and puppet, become blurred through these performative acts.

Initially I felt hesitant about calling my handmade characters *puppets*. As defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, the word *puppet* originates as early as the "Mid 16th century (denoting a doll): later form of poppet, generally having a more unfavorable connotation." Used informally, this was a British term of endearment mostly toward a pretty child or young girl. Historically, poppet also references folk magic and witchcraft, where dolls were made to represent a specific person to cast spells on or aid through magical means. The Latin derivative

of *puppet* is *pupa*, which mysteriously refers to the stage of an insects metamorphosis, also referred to as the transformation from immature and mature stages. This is when larva undergoes a period covered in a chrysalis, before emerging as winged insect. I refer to my characters as puppets with respect to them as materials brought into their own existence of being, their own uncanny and abject life cycles.

Puppetry involves magic but also paradox. The nature of puppets present a series of oppositions. In both their various modes of fabrication and function they enact a double life. Commonly, puppets are made from organic and/or inorganic materials, recycled from a previous purpose into a new one. Despite being a combination and arrangement of material, puppets inherently suggest personhood and liveliness. They portray both inwardness and outwardness, material and life, self and other, subject and object. Perhaps the most relevant paradox embedded in the puppet is its tumultuous kinship between both children and adults. In their best performed state, puppetry is unquestionably best suited as a mature medium. What children notably bring to the art form is imagination and creativity to perceive, and even believe in, such objects as living things. The tension between innocent play and mature content is one of balance and constant bewilderment. I find that one of the most intriguing aspects of puppetry lies in the ability of even the oldest of viewers to rediscover their innocence.

## **Part Two: Process**

As I continue to develop my process, my likeness between human and puppet characteristics grows stronger. While newer technologies of computer-generated imagery and processing may offer accelerated speed and precise accuracy for expediting an animation, all of

these modern and more recent techniques draw upon the rich ancient history and traditions of puppeteering. In contemporary culture there is an accelerating increase of distance, most notably as a result of advancing technologies. While most follow in these trends and dictate their lives by screens and illusion, many are returning to traditional and historical processes that offer more hands on, intimate, and slower methods.

My decision to work through the more traditional process of stop-frame animation reflects my conceptual concerns and existential interests through both the form and the content. My gestural and intuitive process reflects aspects of human nature and life. Through stop-frame animation, both puppets and objects which are initially static and sculptural, take on an illusion of being alive. This laborious and time intensive method requires making a photographic exposure, moving the puppets, making another exposure, and repeating this procedure frame by frame until the course of action is complete. Through careful control physically integrating my hands and body, I essentially breath life into the characters and environments.



Figure 1. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

Sculpted from scratch with my hands and minimal tools, my puppets are not modeled after any particular person. Made from imagination, each puppet develops a unique identity, with distinct characteristics and personality traits. In his book, *Pinocchio's Progeny*, author Harold B. Segal describes how deep-rooted in human history the fascination with puppets has been and continues to be. To such an extent that Segal notes, "It must be regarded as a response to a fundamental need or needs. It is, clearly, a projection of the obsession of human beings with their own image, with their own likeness." He goes on to add, "More profoundly, it reveals a yearning to play god, to master life."<sup>2</sup> When a person sees something that contains anthropomorphic qualities, there is an enjoyable sense of identifying with that thing to which people connect. One may even feel the urge to communicate with it.

My animating process involves this embodied spiritual performance and requires extended periods of time amidst moving my characters bodies, with own body moving in synch. The intimate relationship between puppet and puppeteer remains out of the frame. I contend that this physical exchange taking place in between photographic frames is immensely influential on the outcome of the performance. Through my process of animating puppets, an embodied transference occurs from my human body to my material puppet's body. At its most effective, I propose that this procedure temporarily causes my body to partially and subconsciously transform into that of the puppet. At this point, the animator's gestural, emotional, and physical energy is transferred to the puppet. The rhythm or movement which occurs in between photographic frames creating a stop-motion animation involves the immediate hands of the

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<sup>2</sup> Segel, Harold B. *Pinocchio's Progeny: Puppets, Marionettes, Automatons and Robots in Modernist and Avant-garde Drama*. 1995. Page 4

animator physically handling and manipulating the material memory of their puppet. This is a multidimensional phenomenon in which my role as animator activates the action of my puppet.

Passing details such as fingerprints or exposed wire become more apparent and evident as the animations continue. The way my hands relate proportionally to that of my puppets affects my ability to perform them in such a way as to leave traces of my handling. For example, I use plasticine, a modeling clay, in the making of all of my puppets. Due to its malleable and non-hardening qualities, it is one of the many materials used which remains in an unfixed and constant fragile state for potential transformation. With even a soft touch, it typically retains fingerprints. In my work, each technically considered flaw, such as a fingerprint or wire exposed, is a deliberate reminder of the not so invisible presence of the independent puppeteer.

To develop an illusion of continuous movement and motion frame by frame requires complete mental and physical focus, drawing energy from my entire body. It is often not until I feel physical aching somewhere such as in my shoulders or back, that I become conscious of the somewhat unnatural poses my body forms during these long sessions. I describe this as a subconscious bodily state. I do not attempt to represent realistic fluid movement through my puppets. I think more about the progression of time and motion as a reflection of the characters and content. I draw inspiration about how my puppets perform from an idea expressed by Nathaniel Dorsky in his book *Devotional Cinema*. He writes, “In film, there are two ways of including human beings. One is depicting human beings. Another is to create a film form which, in itself, has all the qualities of being human: tenderness, observation, fear, relaxation, the sense

of stepping into the world and pulling back, expansion, contraction, changing, softening, tenderness of heart. The first is a form of theater and the latter is a form of poetry.”<sup>3</sup>

Through performing, my body becomes almost entranced or muted while all energy of life is transferred from my body to the embodiment of my puppets. How can an inanimate object appear to have a life of its own, even if such object seems to be from another world? My production methodology adopts role play in which I act out each characters body movement and gesture before performing the puppets. This stage of my process allows me to consider and experience the physical and emotional aspects of selected actions. I use this performed experience to influence the way I then move my puppets. I first perform the puppet’s motions with my own body in order to experience the limits of my body before I begin to perform the movements of the puppets.

The landscapes and environments are indicative of the psychological states of the situations and are often representative of what the main character is feeling or experiencing. By use of material, color, and texture, the sets take on anthropomorphic qualities. They are characters themselves, alive with energy and expression. Andre Breton describes in the 1924 Surrealist Manifestos, “I believe in the future resolution of these two states—outwardly so contradictory—which are dream and reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality....”<sup>4</sup> Each animation follows a different course, involving different characters, environments, and scenarios. When viewed together, there are shifting states of harmony and friction among the different characters, situations, and overarching themes as they exist within these crafted worlds.

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<sup>3</sup> Dorsky, Nathaniel. *Devotional Cinema*. Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Andre Breton, excerpts from the “First Surrealist Manifesto,” 1924, quoted in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 196S), 66.



## Materials Move

The puppet bodies exist in a world of material limitations. Keeping in mind that the animator is physically handling the puppets with each and every move they make, it is important to note that the puppets bodies themselves have their own physical constraints. Sometimes unexpectedly, their eyeballs fall out, or perhaps a hand falls off, or even their body reshapes itself from bending around. The puppets' bodies are in a slow state of decay, much like the human body. While all bodies are accelerating at different rates toward this ultimate condition, it is a trait inherently shared by puppet and puppeteer. In his essay about acting and puppetry, Steve Tillis posits, "the signs of life sited on the puppet must themselves be produced by life; the puppet's putative performance is the direct result of the real performance of a living being behind it."<sup>5</sup>

Artist Karen Yasinsky reaffirms that her puppets are material objects, containing no consciousness of their own. Her animated films rely on minimal props and push the consensus of non-linear form. Often her puppets are touching themselves and gesturing expressions. Through their movement, she explains, "they are aware of the surface tension of the air suggesting that having a body can be a struggle, and they touch themselves as if to reassure themselves that they are there."<sup>6</sup> She has also discussed how while animating alone for long periods of time, she becomes hyper aware of her own body and her own subconscious mannerisms. The first time I saw a puppet animation by Yasinsky was a completely transformative experience for me. It forever expanded and opened my perspective to what animation as a medium is capable of. Her

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<sup>5</sup> Tillis, Steve. *The Actor Occluded: Puppet Theatre and Acting Theory*, *Theatre Topics*. 1996.

<sup>6</sup> "Karen Yasinsky : Saint Lucy." Saint Lucy RSS.  
<https://saint-lucy.com/conversations/karen-yasinsky/>.

animations in particular gave me deeper faith in a form I had previously overlooked. One of the many things I learned from carefully observing her work is that puppets could convey such grandiose aspects of human condition, yet through such a stripped down platform small-scale production. Unlike many films that feel the need to captivate their audiences through plot-twists or action adventures, it is in the simpler sophisticated gestures or the private thoughts of her puppets that stay with an audience long after any one of her video's end.

There are also special occasions while performing the puppets that result in improvisation. It always feels like a magical surprise to me when the puppets do something considerably accidental, and seems as though to be of their own will. When these intuitive, unscripted moments occur, I always follow their direction. In a discussion about how the process of creating is concerned less with technique than with feeling, filmmaker Robert Bresson described, "It's like approaching a wild animal. If you are too brusque about it, it will run away... You should try not to think with your intelligence, but with your senses and your heart. With your intuition."<sup>7</sup> An example of this is in one the more physically endurance based situations, in my animation *Who's A Good Girl*. A dog-walking situation escalates into a point of conflict where one dog kills another. One of the dogs takes a bite of the other's flesh. As I was animating this action, the dog's mouth was open wide and one of its individual teeth pierced the other dogs body in an effort to take a bite out of it. As I began to separate the bodies and pull the dogs mouthful away, I noticed one of the teeth was left wedged into the body of the injured dog.

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<sup>7</sup> Schrader, Paul. *Robert Bresson, Possibly*. ProQuest. 1977.  
<https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/210233716?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=14780>.



Figure 2. *Who's A Good Girl*, two still frames from stop-frame animation.

Upon recognizing this, I could have removed the tooth and returned it to his mouth as though it never happened. Although the incident was not planned, it was spontaneous and intrinsic. Most of all, the mysterious improvisation made up of a combination of my puppet handling as well as the puppet's material properties resulted in an entirely natural gesture. After all, instinct is the main motivation and drive behind this animation. Instead of fixing it, I embraced the improvised gesture and continued the energy throughout the performance of the following actions.

### Sound

Each of the animations has an original soundtrack, choreographed independently to accommodate the content. While my collaborator and I are in continual dialogue about the production, musician Nicholas Daly does all of the recording, mixing, composing, and overall production of the tracks at his own discretion. At certain points the soundtrack is strictly musical or foley oriented, while at other points the two are merged. The sounds are counterintuitive in an effort to aid the viewer in overcoming the initial surprise of what they are seeing so they can move past that to consider it on a deeper level. For example, in *Who's A Good Girl* the music

begins very upbeat and almost carnivalesque as the woman and her dog are enjoying a beautiful day outside. When the situation changes and escalates into conflict, the music continues on as optimistic and cheerful. The contention between the positive music and the not so positive conflict creates both a feeling of ease and unease. Sound is a crucial element to the interpretation of the overall animation. It is a medium that is not seen but perceived and felt, it communicates more in the realm of emotion. The content of the animations are dictated by feelings prior to logic. Sound is especially influential in how the viewer moves through the emotional storyline. The sound and animation production process contain similarities, as both contain a lot of building and rebuilding, creating from scratch, and trying to fit the right pieces together in a greater puzzle.

### **Part Three: Animations**

#### **Who's A Good Girl**



Figure 3. *Who's A Good Girl*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

My thoughts at the time before beginning any of these animations revolved around my research of human nature. I wanted to continue in the direction of exploring the animal nature within humans. Particularly, what happens when a situation escalates so far and so quickly from a heated moment, exceeding one's ability to make rational judgements? At this time, I was also walking dogs part-time to make some extra money. This resulted in my experience with a variety of different breeds and dog personalities. While each dog was unique and a product of their circumstances, our experience walking together outside would always contain similarities when we would pass another dog. When two dogs, each on each opposing side of the sidewalk, would recognize each other it was as though the tension thickened, the neighborhood became eerily silent, and everyone stayed still waiting to see who would make the next move and in what manner.



Figure 4. *Who's A Good Girl*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

Would they erupt in vicious barking? Would they enter a stare off? Would they pay no mind to the other? It always feels unpredictable. These are characteristics and moods I wanted to carry over into the animation. The first animation is titled *Who's A Good Girl*, throughout which

animal-like behaviors and instinct shifts intensity between all of the four characters. Structurally, the story contains a lot of mirroring between expected conduct of the human characters and the dogs. The very opening shot shows a woman urinating outside in the grass. There is a level of suggested humor here since in the following shots it becomes clear this woman is out on a walk with her dog, who would typically be doing the urinating. This raises the question of who exactly is walking who, with undertones of critiquing power dynamics. Right from the start it is clear that one should not be fooled by the play-doh palette and cheerful music, this is a stop-frame animation for adults.



Figure 5. *Who's A Good Girl*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

What begins as a pleasant dream-like day outside walking one's dog quickly escalates into a horrifying nightmarish murder-filled catastrophe. The story or situations are amplified beyond our perceptions of reality. My animated characters exist in a fantastic realm of their own, where any trace of fear, shame, pride, and guilt arise and are brought to the forefront for examination and exaggeration. As is often the case in a dream state, situations become out of hand and are as uncontrollable as they would be in a real situation. On the surface the animation



confronts intense levels of violence, but below that is the instinctual urge to follow this behavior. When I began animating, my thoughts digressed into morality and whether one is still innocent despite being overwhelmed and ruled by emotion.

### Wave



Figure 6. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

“Is the photograph more dramatic than what was photographed? It has to be.”<sup>8</sup>

After moving away from the first animation I considered how I could continue to push the conversation of animalistic human nature without the deliberate presence of animals. Another crucial aspect which began in *Who's A Good Girl* is confronting content that is considered to be taboo but is explored as such to affirm the contrary. Sex is a fundamental trait shared both by humans and animals. Also, considering that my last animation deals with instinct and an emotional situation that spirals out of control, I was especially interested in exploring sex as an act in which those involved can lose themselves. In other words, an act in which feeling may

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<sup>8</sup> Winogrand, Garry. “On Photography.” Artist Lecture. 1977, Houston, Rice University.

overrule and become a sort of out of body experience. My process can become drawn out, even before I begin animating. Creating all of the pieces to the set and worlds is very slow and involves a lot of starting and restarting, material failures which often lead to stronger solutions, and careful delicate evolutions of the characters. During this very intense and especially hands-on stages, I have a lot of time to think about what is going to happen in each animation. I never storyboard or write scripts, but rather pre-visualize and imagine everything clearly in my head, scene by scene and image by image, exactly as I plan to do it when I do get behind the camera. This is important to me, especially considering my background in photography, as it leaves room for spontaneity and creativity in terms of composing the camera in the space and how the story will unfold visually. As the main character for *Wave* developed, the story became situated more specifically as sex and how the female body relates to womanhood, and birth. Her birth is particularly intimate and becomes an orgasmic experience, also known as birthgasm.



Figure 7. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

The opening shot is of a boat afloat, but tied by a long rope that runs out of frame. The water is still and thoroughly reflecting the warm red and yellow clouds from the sky. This



landscape depicts more than the scene on the surface, but also creates the atmosphere of being inside of the womb space.



Figure 8. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

The camera then stream-of-consciousness style follows the rope, referential to an umbilical cord, until reaching the dock where a woman's pregnant stomach then fills the frame. A companion joins her on the dock and graciously helps her onto the boat to which she then sails away. The nature of their relationship is as ambiguous as the identity of the second character, who is never shown from the front but only behind. The lack of information about these circumstances as well as this character's identity is reminiscent of dream logic, wherein details are slightly off and fall out of memory upon waking. Additionally, it foreshadows the ending, which also abruptly concludes without resolution at the height of a situation.



Figure 9. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

As with all three animations, the landscape is a fluid character which changes with the mood of the story. As she drifts away in her boat, the significance of the dock represents a tangible connection between contradictions: between land and sea, consciousness and subconsciousness, rationality and irrationality. Once departed and far off into the colorful middle of nowhere, it appears as though she is contently alone. After doggedly devouring a sandwich, she pulls binoculars from her basket and begins gazing at the sky and the sea. Continuing to look around, she unexpectedly stumbles upon what appears to be an orgy occurring on land.

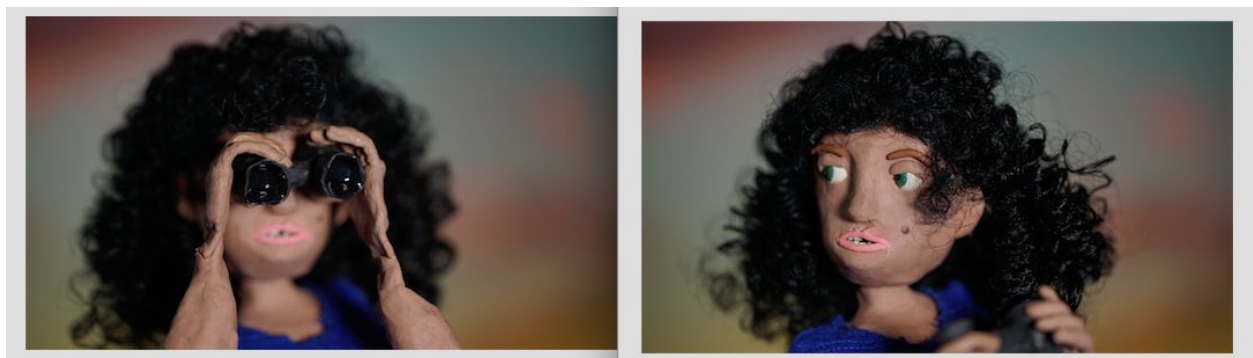


Figure 10. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

At first realization of this she pulls the binoculars down and looks both ways, showing self-consciousness, but remembers no one is around her, so she continues to look on for a while. When she puts the binoculars down, she begins to rest and think while the sun sets to passionate red and the surrounding waves begin to pick up in an uncontrollable nature. Thinking about what she saw, she begins changing states of emotion just as swiftly as the weather begins changing around her, and she decides to begin masturbating.



Figure 11. *Wave*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

The focus here is less on the physical body but more on her face as it communicates her internal journey, emotions, thoughts, and feelings. This scene of tension and release is both about power and vulnerability. It is less about sexualizing her actions than it is about exploring the erotic as a source of power and information. In Adrienne Maree Brown's compilation, *Pleasure Activism*, there is an essay by Audre Lorde called "Uses of the Erotic." Lorde recontextualizes the term erotic, stating it has previously been misnamed by men in use against women. She writes, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it,

we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

Suddenly, the character’s expressions of sexual pleasure take a fast turn into a new pace of physical pleasure as she realizes she has unintentionally induced her labor. At this point of situational intensity with suspension rising, the camera suddenly drifts away from this scene entirely and follows along the rushing waves into a new direction. During this drifting away and following of the rhythmic waves, a fish jumps out of water. The fish, which leaps out from the water into the air and back below the waves, is a reminder of what lies beneath the surface. At this point of the story, the fish which appears as quickly as it disappears also hints at the absurdities of life, and the rapid passage of time. This conundrum between what is revealed and what remains hidden further connotes the slippery construction of self identity: something always remains hidden, and there is always another layer to be peeled.

### **Spider Under A Glass**

Moving into my next animation, I became aware of how the previous two had similarly built up a climactic narrative rhythm in which the viewer was waiting for a turning point, moments where everything was on the verge of turning upside down. While the prior animations are more in line with dream logic and a surrealistic stream of consciousness, I decided to go against the expectations of viewers that may have been building, and instead redirect attention to empty space and the experience of time’s passing. What I found is that both high-paced action and slow-paced inaction are challenging in their own right. Both animations begin with a level of

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, Adrienne M. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019. “Uses Of the Erotic,” Audre Lorde

reality and unravel into a more surrealistic state. Moving into this next animation, I wanted to hone the attention toward a more grounded quiet loneliness from which the simplified storyline evolves. The viewer is subject to endure the same mundane mindspace the character inhabits. The photographs of artist Peggy Levison Nolan are perfectly described in her artist statement, “I never remember dreams of flying or falling from great heights or losing my teeth. I remember dreams of looking for car keys, running my fingers over dusty furniture, making coffee and feeding the cat and the dog, looking out the window for birds.”<sup>10</sup>

The very gesture of putting a container over an insect and how it speaks more metaphorically to feelings of entrapment, concealment, and the power dynamics of control were of initial interest to me. The instinctual reaction to cupping a bug could be out of fear or perhaps loneliness and a desire to keep it almost in the same relational way that humans keep animals as pets. There are only two characters: one is an older man and the other is a spider, who is arguably the main character. The animation takes place inside of this man’s decaying home. Perhaps the most psychological of all my environments thus far, the room is a domestic reflection into the characters mind. Aging and staining, the colorful room is mostly bare and unkept with a few items of furniture and belongings.

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<sup>10</sup> Peggy Levison Nolan. Dina Mitrani Gallery  
Miami, [www.dinamitranigallery.com/peggy-levison-nolan/](http://www.dinamitranigallery.com/peggy-levison-nolan/).



Figure 12. *Spider Under A Glass*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

The opening shot reveals the bright, hard-edged shadow of an open window cast onto the wall. An unidentifiable winged animal flies by and lands on the window sill. Possibly a bird or a bat, it flaps its wings for a while before flying away with an amorphous, shape-shifting form of a shadow. The focus shifts to the silhouette of a table corner, where the spider enters the frame as it is deep in web-making ritual. Repeating actions and going back and forth in a rhythmic pattern, the spider fills the frame as the perspective is from its world.



Figure 13. *Spider Under A Glass*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

The slowness and delicacy involved in making the web is mimicked by the treatment of the camera. The spider crawls along the table in one last strut before suddenly becoming captured by a container. This also overwhelms the frame as the glass creates reflections and distortions in a hypnotic manner, before the camera transitions from this smaller scale back into the realm of the older man. Smoking a cigarette, he seems almost in a still shock similar to that of the spider as it was trapped. This stillness and trance is evidenced through time measured by his cigarette which has burned entirely to ash.



Figure 14. *Spider Under A Glass*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

Upon realizing this he drops the ashes to the floor and puts the butt into his ashtray. He walks across the room and takes a seat in a green brown-buttoned sofa. The materiality of the chair is merging with the material-makeup of the character himself, further exaggerating the relationship between environment and character as one.





Figure 15. *Spider Under A Glass*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

Likewise, it begins to rain outside, and the room fills with a physical interruption of light each time lightning strikes outside. He taps his fingers around, reminiscent of the spiders fast moving legs, before pulling out another cigarette. He begins to strike a match, but repeats this action unsuccessfully.



Figure 16. *Spider Under A Glass*, individual frame from stop-frame animation.

This action is directly inspired by a moment in the 1952 Vittorio De Sica neorealist film *Umberto D*. This is an uncomplicated film that follows the story of a complicated social issue.



Within the film, there is a scene where actress Maria Pia Casilio attempts to strike a match to light the oven. She continues to strike a match over and over, each catching no flame. The combination of the bareness of the room, the emptiness in the characters expression, and the unsuccessful match striking, epitomizes a tangible portrayal of loneliness. This informed the slowness that follows the older man before he eventually gives up and pulls the cigarette from his lips.

After his cigarette attempt fails it becomes evident that he has little else to do and quickly falls asleep. This is the first time in this series of animations where a character physically enters a sleeping or dreaming state. At this point, the perspective shifts yet again to show both the room itself in addition to the characters dreams and internal state as they begin to intertwine. A drip begins to enter the room from the ceiling. While it is heavily raining outside, it is not an ordinary rainwater drip, but rather an intensified and perhaps imaginary heavy goo which not only leaks into the room but so happens to drip directly on to his head. This drop, which drools over his head, wakes him from his slumber as he peers up to see what the source is.



Figure 17 Spider Under A Glass, individual frame from stop-frame animation

From this point to the end of the animation, the environment and space become indistinguishable from the character. The lightning eventually strikes the power out and the man is alone in the darkness, only to be seen by another strike of lightning. The old man and the spider are alone, but perhaps alone together.

#### **Part Four: Exhibition: The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last**



Figure 18. *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

The title of my MFA Thesis show is a spin off of a Charles Bukowski collection of poems titled *The People Look Like Flowers At Last*. My play on words between interchanging people with puppets further implies the indecipherability between the two as this relationship becomes more ambiguous throughout my animations. Bukowski's collection of poems, like the majority of his work, has both sweet and sour characteristics within that I think is also present in my animations, which have a surface of sweet vibrant colors and textures but a conceptual underbelly that is more raw and complex. To say the puppets look like flowers at last is an

exuberant statement from me to myself and from me to my viewers. It is to say that at last, if you watch the animations and submit to the experience, the puppets who may initially appear grotesque on the surface will reveal themselves as honest, brave, bold, confident, and vulnerable characters trekking through the hardships of life familiar to us all.



Figure 1.9 *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

While I am in the stages of creating the animation pieces and sets as well as during the long, isolated periods of time during which I am immersed in the construction of the sets, I become hyper aware of the textures and details that impact the overall atmosphere. As I was developing this installation, I worried that some of the information might get lost when transferred two-dimensionally to the screen. To counter that, as well as to help alleviate a viewer's transition from everyday reality into the intensified realities developed within the animations, I designed the installation in such a way as to become a more customized viewing experience. The gallery space contains special lighting that casts an overall blue hue to the room that viewers physically stepped into upon entering the room, with warmer yellow spotlights on

two individual animatronic animals. Each of the three animations played on individual monitors. The floor was carpeted, with a large pastel pink rug spanning the majority of the room. In all four corners of the room were dark green rugs. All of the rugs were not straight edged but rather rounded, cut fluidly to resemble water flowing out and creating a amorphous shape.

### Animating Space



Figure 20. *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

As I mentioned, I wanted the installation space to resemble the animations in an alternate world manner. In considering how I can animate the space of the room and ultimately cause the viewer to become more aware of their own body in this space, I decided to separate the animations around the room, each playing on their own monitor. All three monitors were in synch so one animation would play at a time on a continuous loop, moving through the room in a cyclical manner. While one animation was playing, the other two monitors transitioned slowly

from one color to another. The colors transitioning were deliberately chosen to further emphasize the emotional content occurring in the animation.

### **Animal Animatronics**

During the time I began making the first animation *Who's A Good Girl*, I also started taking care of dogs as a side job. One weekend, while one of my favorites was staying at my apartment, I began to create a lifesize sculptural dog, using the live visiting dog as reference for scale and such. My intention in the beginning was to create a dog, not to replicate any of the characters in the animation, but to expand on the atmosphere and create a character from that same state of mind. What resulted was more of an aberration of an actual dog than what one might expect to see.



Figure 21. Sculptural Animal Documentation.

The ambiguity of the sculptured animal is a trait shared with all my animated characters. It became clear that my sculptural process and choice of materials is similar to my puppet making process, just on different scales. Viewing the kinetic animation alongside the stagnant



sculpture revealed a disconnect in form and motion. They had in common a saturated color palette, unique personality, distinct characterization, and more, but beside one another, the sculpture just needed to be set into motion ever so slightly to give it life. As with my lack in formal training in animation, I have no training in robotics. Nevertheless, I began teaching myself and studying bits and pieces from an array of sources. I decided to make the tail wag, as a dog's tail is one of the most indicative gestures revealing their mood.

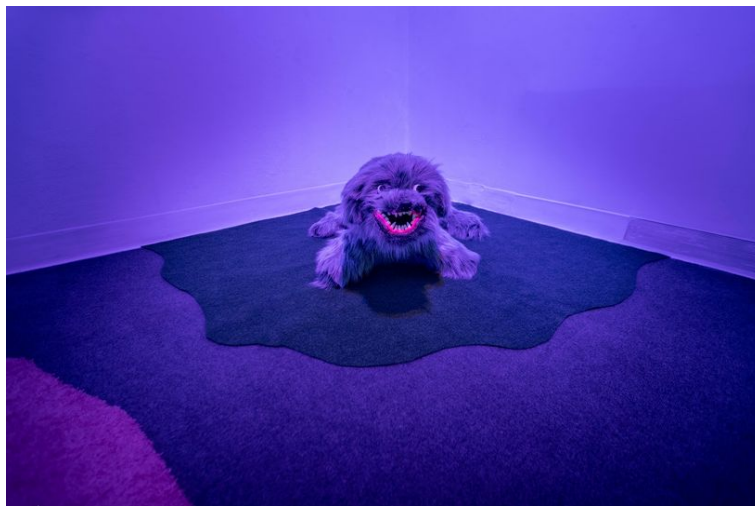


Figure 22. *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

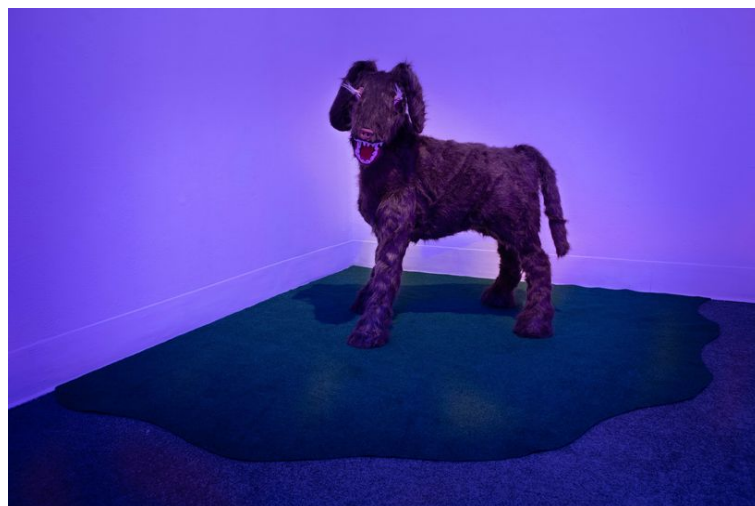


Figure 23. *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

The second animatronic animal I made is more technologically advanced than the first. It blinks its eyes, moves its head from side to side, as well as wags its tail. As with the animations, the sculptures contain a double-edged quality where they coexist as sweet and playful but also haunted and frightening.



Figure 24. *The Puppets Look Like Flowers At Last*, MFA Thesis Exhibit Documentation.

### **Final Remarks**

While my thesis work most neatly fits into the category of animation, I don't think of myself solely as an animator. This is mostly because I see stop-frame animation as merely the best manner for me in which to output the idea most suitably. The various stages in my process just as much involve painting, sewing, sculpting, and puppetry as they do animating. In fact my process of building and creating the puppets, props, sets, and scenarios requires much more time than the actual animating itself. I approach animation in a more liberated manner. Although the process is slow and calculated, my animating attitude is more improvisational and intuitive as I attempt to embed a level of spontaneity in the scenes.

The quick cuts, camerawork, and overall editing, more broadly reflect the nature of our current relationship with internet culture and the need for immediate results. My initial introduction to photography through classic photographers such as Diane Arbus, Robert Frank, and Emmet Gowin, all whom of which remain my personal favorites, have influenced my approach to composition, cinematography, and my treatment of each stop-frame as a stand alone photograph. I think of my animations more from a cinematic perspective that is influenced by my background in lens-based storytelling. I also draw inspiration from innovative French and Swedish filmmakers, Jean-Luc Godard, Ingmar Bergman, and Robert Bresson, to name a few. Some of these directors approach filmmaking in such a way that is both specific and nonspecific simultaneously. They strike a balance in their films to allow for an audience to get lost in the characters or even experience the stories vicariously. I personally find this transcendental experience within their films to be similarly experienced through some of my favorite photographs. A photograph, although a manipulated moment, has the power to suggest specificity by its literal relationship to referencing reality. In spite of that, a photograph contains the mysterious power of never revealing a before or after of it's moment, nor what lies beyond the confines of the frame. Both filmmaking and photography share a language of the lens, just as experiencing the world through the lens of our eyes relates to time, both present and remembered. Paul Schrader, both a filmmaker and film critic, expands on this technique in his book *Transcendental Style*, in which he writes “transcendental style, like the mass, transforms experience into a repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly transcended.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Schrader, Paul. *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu Bresson Dreyer - With a New Introduction - Rethinking Transcendental Style*. University of California Press, 2018.



My animations confront the complex nature of inner life. Each short animation attempts to resolve conflicting elements of the human psyche. This of course is an aim with no finite end. My practice will continue to challenge these emotionally complex subjects as each animation may get closer and closer to a question that poses no answer other than the intense feelings of existence. On some occasions while working, I suddenly notice out of the corner of my eye a slight movement of the puppet in the scene without me touching it. Whether it was a loose wire that gravity pulled or a loose eyeball that popped out from its socket, there is always an instant reaction of suspense and curious wonder. This causes me stop in that split second and think to myself, “is this puppet actually alive?” But we all know the answer to that. Or do we?

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